

# <INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE The Global Meanings of Japan: European and Asian Perspectives>The Theory of Japanese Culture and the Theory of Reverse Absence

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# The Theory of Japanese Culture and the Theory of Reverse Absence

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## 1. THE DILEMMA OF HETEROGENEITY

This paper discusses the methodological problems that occur when a “theory,” which has as its foothold the analysis of Japan as a “local subject,” is raised to a more universal theory. The socio-scientific analysis of Japan is, unavoidably reduced to “the dilemma of heterogeneity.” This dilemma has appeared when an attempt was made to analyze Japan head-on in the context of the intellectual environment in which the socio-scientific research of Japan has taken place since the Meiji era.

As is generally known, conventional social science has originated in an attempt to understand the characteristics of the socio-historical changes of the “modern ages” (this concept being in itself a European local idea) of the European countries. However, if a concept developed in such a way is applied as such to Japan, then the discrepancy between “theory” and “reality” becomes evidently bigger. And when we try to adhere to the “theory” as such, the possibility grows that the case of Japan is seen as a peculiar case. On the other hand, when we move away from socio-scientific tradition and use a “theory” that explains only the “reality” of Japan, then we have to deal with the limitation that this “theory” is only applicable to Japan. And this means that we consider Japan as a heterogeneous society from the start.

This is a dilemma in the sense that we can do nothing but emphasize the “heterogeneity” in our interpretation of Japan whether we depend on a socio-scientific “theory,” which is influenced by orthodox, Western socio-historical characteristics and is formed with universal assumptions as its origin, or conversely we depend on a “theory” grounded on the Japanese “reality.” The American Japanologist and economist Chalmers Johnson, author of *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*, indicates that Western economic theories (the neoclassical school, Keynesianism, Marxism) can not satisfactorily explain the achieve-

ments of the Japanese economy and says: "still the people who play a leading role in this field, rather argue that Japan is an exception ("cultural peculiarity" is their excuse), than conclude that this failure is a question of economic theory or they (by juggling the figure's) forcibly change the Japanese data to fit in with the theory."<sup>1</sup>

This indication by Chalmers Johnson is suggestive. When the "achievements" of the Japanese economy are not satisfactorily explained by means of existing Western economic "theories," logically the "theory" ought to be changed, but actually one ends up by changing data or by emphasizing the fact that this is an "exception" or "marginal case," which does not fit well into the framework of the theory. This means that the level of universality of a "theory" is not raised by the subsumption of concrete cases, but that the "reality" is excluded from the "theory" in order to protect the universality which is assumed beforehand.

Thus it is the exceptionality of the behavior and values of the Japanese that is put forward as a ground for the impossibility of a reasonable explanation within the framework of the "theory." In sum the crisis of the universal adaptability of the "theory" is overcome by emphasizing the heterogeneity (cultural peculiarity) of the Japanese culture. Or again, as is often done in socio-scientific analyses of Japan, "the inclination was strong to lump together the social phenomena not present in the west and to explain them as Japanese backwardness or as feudal remainders,"<sup>2</sup> in other words an attempt was made to adjust the discrepancy between "theory" and "reality" by emphasizing the social phenomena that seem peculiar to Japan and by emphasizing that the old elements survive in a peculiar form (backwardness, feudal remainders, etc).

As a theory is brought about by a one-sided emphasis of "reality," then viewed in the light of its original character, it is undoubtedly inevitable that discrepancies appear in any social analysis. Nakane Chie points out: "The discrepancy between *riiron* (model) and *genjitsu* (reality) may well be discovered in this way in both the case of "the West" and "Japan," but the real problem is what the discrepancy should be. In other words, the nature of the discrepancy differs, if this discrepancy is seen as a component situated in the periphery remote from the heart of the problem or seen as a fatal part of it."<sup>3</sup>

To analyze Japan head-on within the framework of an independent theory and to avoid relying on conventional Western-made "theories," the Japanese socio-historical characteristics have to be preinserted in the "core" of this "theory." As long as this is not the case, the discrepancy between "theory" and "reality" will probably not occur in the "periphery" but in the "fatal part." If this discrepancy exists in the "periphery," then analysis becomes possible by merely applying a specified set of restrictions to the "theory," but if the discrepancy is found in the "fatal part," then properly speaking it is neces-



sary to change the "theory" substantially, because the "theory" has obvious limitations in its adaptability.

Yet, using for an "explanation" the indication that certain kinds of inclinations and attributes, which appear as theoretical requirements, are "absent" in Japan, is what has been actually done. Let us assume, for example, a genuine theoretical model of a situation in which the feudal system became entirely extinct, due to abstraction, from the historical experience of France or England (we may think of the coming into existence of civil society, individualism, political democracy, etc.). As a matter of course, the discrepancy between this model and the "reality" of Western countries will be small. The discrepancy with "reality" will eventually occur in the "fatal part" of the "theory," when applied on the contrary to a country like Japan, where in the process of theory building there was no opportunity to insert the autochthonous socio-historical characteristics into the "theory." The substitutional concept for the purpose of explanation termed "feudal remainders" was conceived of to dispose the discrepancy which occurred in this way.

In any country, social "remainders" of previous ages survive. No society comes to a rupture with previous ages and undergoes such a clear-cut social change. When, in spite of this, theoretically "feudal remainders" are found only in Japan, then this means nothing else than that the Japanese characteristics are not inserted in the "core" of the "theory."

If the "critical part," which ought to be explained, is not considered satisfactorily explainable by the conventional "theory," then the fact that such inclinations and attributes which the "theory" requires are "absent," becomes the principle of explanation which makes the "reality" of that country its "reality." This means that the fact of the impossibility of an explanation by means of the "theory," eventually becomes the explanation.

As was the case with Japan in the past century, during the period in which there was a hard struggle to introduce into Japan various Western models, the analysis of "reality" and the reform of "reality" was in a close indivisible situation and there was no need to consider the shortcomings of this kind of theoretical explanation of absences seriously, because the reform of "reality" was realized by the introduction from the West of the things that were "absent" in Japan, and therefore it was no wonder that this kind of perception as such was believed to be the analysis of "reality." However, if we do not possess an independent social science, then no Japanese socio-historical characteristics will be inserted in the "core" of the "theory" and the situation in which the socio-scientific elucidation of Japan is not brought about will continue to exist.

## 2. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE THEORY OF JAPANESE CULTURE

The rapid postwar growth of the Japanese economy has had a great influence on the socio-scientific research of Japan. One has to realize that the intellectual product that is called "theory of Japanese culture" came into existence as a result of the challenge for Japan after this economic high growth to possess an independent socio-cultural scientific "theory," without regard to what extent the theorists themselves are aware of this. What is called the theory of Japanese culture contains a lot of material that is no more than a collection of journalistic topics, and as Harumi Befu says, one cannot deny the "mass-consumption" side of these materials.<sup>4</sup>

Again, as Aoki Tamotsu emphasizes, it is a fact that "theories of Japanese culture" appeared at a moment that Japanese self-confidence, which was raised by the successes of a high growth economy, resulted in a search for "cultural identity."<sup>5</sup> Certainly from the latter half of the 1960s there was a nationalistic sentiment to depict Japan as "affirmative" at the background of the theory of Japanese culture. But at present it is not important to analyze or criticize this kind of ideology. To surmount the "theory of absences" and to come to an analysis of the Japanese "reality" by means of an independent "theory" called the theory of Japanese culture-this kind of nationalistic motive was necessary as its driving force and was even a natural desire.

Hereafter I want to limit myself to the methodological problems that some of these theories of Japanese culture raise. This is because through the treatment of these problems I want to think of a way to surmount the "dilemma of heterogeneity" that I have brought forward at the beginning of this paper. The conventional legitimate standpoint of the social science of Japan, being the adaptation of the broad framework of the Western-made socio-scientific concepts and the partial corrections to make the Japanese "reality" analyzable within this framework, was in its own way persuasive as far as the Japanese themselves did not have confidence in their own society. As previously stated, this is because the very "nature of absence" (what Aoki Tamotsu calls "negative peculiarities") possesses practical and cognitive values.

However in the latter half of the 1960s, when part of the Japanese had become conscious of the "affirmative peculiarities" of their culture, it became clear that the existing condition could not be explained satisfactorily by means of the traditional theory of absences. This stems from the fact that if the existing condition of Japan is basically seen as "affirmative," the grasping of the existing condition as "absent" has to be denied practically as well as cognitively. Why is it that the economic growth of Japan is so high and smooth in this country, which is still backward and where an old social constitution survives?



An explanation like the theory of absences may indeed become a tentative explanation of stagnation or social abnormal characteristics, but it will never become an explanation of economic success.

When the advocates of the “affirmative” theory of Japanese culture, which originated in the latter half of the 1960s, tried to see the Japanese existing condition as “affirmative,” they had to create a “theory” that was adapted to the existing condition of Japan, without borrowing a theoretical framework from outside. In one of the representative works of this period, *Tate Shakai no Ningen Kankei* (Human Relations in a Vertical Society), Nakane Chie explains her standpoint not as a borrowed theory from the West, but as an socio-anthropological method in which she “interprets the data of field studies of a uniform society based on a uniform methodology, and by synthesizing these, she abstracts and theorizes the principles which are thought to be fundamental for that society.”

In the sense that her theory of a vertical society, which is conceived within the framework of a comparison between Indian and Japanese society, abstracts the “principles which are thought to be fundamental,” according to its very methodology, drawn directly from Japanese “reality,” one has to admit that this theory differs largely from the conventional tradition of social science. In this sense I appreciate theories of Japanese culture of good quality. But as long as the theory of Japanese culture is confined to the interpretation of the Japanese “culture” alone, we cannot escape from the “dilemma of heterogeneity.” In other words, my dissatisfaction with theories of Japanese culture lies in the fact that, having as its goal the analysis of Japan, the theory of Japan is limited to a “theory” that can only be applied to the “local subject” of Japanese culture. Is it not right to say that a theory that only explains Japanese culture satisfactorily and moreover does not confine itself to Japan alone is suitable to be called a “theory”?

The theories of Japanese culture, written from the latter half of the 1960s onward, however, did not succeed in this process. Why? The main reason is that the theory of Japanese culture originated as a negation of the “negative peculiarities” that had come into being as a result of the theory of absences — that is, the problem which the subject to be negated had, was, by reversing its evaluation from “negative” to “positive,” as a matter of fact inherited as such. This appears in the extreme adherence to “peculiarities.” The weakness of “theories of Japanese culture” is hidden clearly in this very point.

If you analyze Japan, let Japan speak for itself. The Japanese “reality” can only be explained by Japanese characteristics. If we state that the theory of absences has originated from excess generalization of Western “theories,” then we have to state also that theories of Japanese culture has an excess specification as its feature. If “absences” was the feature of “negative (Japanese) pecu-

liarities," then "manifestation" is the feature of the theories of Japanese culture, aimed at "affirmative (Japanese) peculiarities." A wide range of Japanese virtues, including Japan's economic success, were perceived as "manifestations" of special qualities that the Japanese essentially possessed.

Are what is conceived as the Japanese characteristics really "only" Japanese features? Provided that Japanese cultural characteristics are also found in other countries, and moreover a large difference in the level of structure of political, economic and social stratum is perceived, why is that so? What should be the meaning of "culture" in the theory of Japanese culture in the first place?

I want to consider this problem from two sides. The first problem is the international isolation in which Japan is placed, and the second is at what point and by means of what kind of process the concept of "culture" should be introduced into the theoretical analysis of Japan.

Let us start with the first problem. The reason there was hitherto in some way or other self-confidence in the "universality" of the Western socio-scientific theories lies in the fact that these were "theories" built on the absorption of examples not only of one's own country, but also of various other countries in the West. On the contrary we cannot detect countries that share with Japan socio-historical characteristics, certain parts of culture, as well as attributes of a presently highly industrialized society. When we construct a "theory" with Japan as its center and also raise the "theory" to a level where we do not confine ourselves to Japan alone, the possibility grows that the discrepancy between this "theory" and the "reality" in countries outside Japan will not occur in the "periphery" but in a "Critical part." The theory of Japanese culture seems to symbolize Japan's international isolation. It is no one else than the Japanese themselves who emphasize the "affirmative peculiarities" of Japan and the situation in which this isolation is increasingly deepened due to this emphasis is critical.

To analyze Japan sufficiently by putting Japan in front of the theory, there is, however, nothing else to do than to depart from the Japanese "reality." And in this case we shall need to reexamine once again, at the basis of a more general viewpoint, the proposition concerning Japan's "peculiarities" in order to build up a "theory" that sufficiently explains Japan and moreover does not confine itself to Japan. In fact, the problem is totally concerned with the question of whether the "phenomena observed in Japan" are "only to be observed in Japan" or not. Are the various propositions brought forward by theories of Japanese culture only applicable to Japan? These kinds of questions ought to be examined much more carefully. If there is a country with a culture very much like the Japanese culture, is it then not possible for these features to be theorized not as a peculiarity of the Japanese culture, but as one pattern of



culture, human relations, or social structure that has surmounted to some degree Japan as a "local region"?

Hamaguchi Eshun is a representative of this joint research as well as a representative advocate of the theory of Japanese culture. The transition of the signification of his *relatum-ism* is a valuable attempt for an advocate of the theory of Japanese culture to go beyond this theory. Hamaguchi's "*relatum-model*" was an empirical proposition related to the behavior and human view of the Japanese, with the essence of mutual dependence, mutual trust, and personal relationship as its main attributes.

To summarize, this was one theory of Japanese culture.<sup>6</sup> However, Hamaguchi has recently shifted this "*relatum-model*" to a discussion of metatheoretic level by using the term "*methodological relatum-ism*."<sup>7</sup>

There are probably two methods that maybe employed to prevent the theory of Japanese culture from confining itself exclusively to the analysis of Japanese "culture." The first method is to ascertain if the theory of Japan as an empirical proposition is really applicable to "Japan alone." For the *relatum-model*, this implies, for example, the task to verify whether or not this model is also effective for the analysis of Chinese culture. Or to try to generalize a Japan-made "theory" in order to obtain effectiveness in the analysis of other cultures, devising partial corrections or sub-types of the "*relatum-model*."

The second method consists of the completion of a kind of metatheory, in which the "relationship between human beings" is put in a central position as a methodology to analyze cultures. To put it into more exact terms, this means raising the relationalistic theory construction, which does not assume theories of individual realism or group realism, to a "universally" applicable methodology. Hamaguchi's present standpoint is clearly shifting its focus to a "*relatum-ism* as metatheory."

These two standpoints are of course closely related to each other. If it is actually proved that some relationalistic cultures also exist outside Japan, then the relationalistic theory construction will broaden the extent of its applicability as a methodology. And if, on the other hand, a methodological relationalism comes into being and a large number of countries are investigated and analyzed by this conception, then more relationalistic societies and cultures than before will probably be "discovered."

Contrary to Hamaguchi's opinion, I think that it will be more productive to concentrate on the first method to escape from the "dilemma of heterogeneity." Would it not be more productive for a theorist who starts from the "*relatum-model*" as a theory of Japanese culture, to prove the existence of relationalism in the culture of other countries, to concentrate on the problem of its extent and intensity and what kind of analytical subconcept can be abstracted



from relationalism, and, when this kind of empirical research has reached a certain degree of accumulation, to hold a debate centering around "relationalism as a metatheory"?

In opposition to Hamaguchi's basic framing of the problem, in which the "individual model" (egocentrism) is a Western model, Hamaguchi says that "Orientals" fit in a "relatum-model" (relationship centrism),<sup>8</sup> and this was not a theory of Japanese culture". For Hamaguchi, who has a good command of elaborate theories, one cannot but be astonished at this really rough manner of dividing the world. Still further it is astonishing that Hamaguchi, who claims more than anyone the breakaway from the "Western analytic model," uses Western concepts like "the Orient" without difficulty.

In *Tonan Ajia no soshiki genri* (The Organizational Principles of Southeast Asia), Maeda Narifumi analyzes the structural principles of Southeast Asia from the standpoint of "personal relationships," very much like Hamaguchi's "relatum-model." This sociologist of the family, who has continued his fieldwork on Southeast Asia for years, describes the organizational principle of this region as relationalistic in such a way that countries like Japan, etc., are but to be thought of as societies not having yet fully completed relationalism. When one examines Maeda's analysis of the social structure of Southeast Asia, the new question arises of how far the relationship termed "relatum-model," which Hamaguchi has advanced, has been fully completed in Japan. When we think in this way, we reach the paradox that relationship centrism can be discovered in a more genuine form in the "culture" of other countries than in the culture of Japan.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. THE POSITION OF CULTURE

Finally, the last problem to deal with is the positioning of the concept of "culture." Advocates of the theory of Japanese culture, whether they use the concept of "culture" or not, put the fundamental principles, personal relationships, values, etc., which are conceived as common between the Japanese, into question. For example: "This fundamental principle is (in social anthropology) at all times pursued with as its basis the relationship between individuals or between groups consisting of individuals." "This relationship is the most unchangeable part in the diverse elements constituting society (or culture)."<sup>10</sup>

To discover "the elements" that exist most deeply in society or culture and are moreover "its most unchangeable part" was the biggest objective of the theory of Japanese culture, but what kind of explainability concerning "reality" the elements discovered in this way have, is what we have to question. I regret that the theories of Japanese culture neglect the important questions of

when and by what kind of procedures the concept of "culture" has to be introduced into the theoretical analysis. As a result of this the Japanese "reality" is far too often explained as "culture."

Leaving aside the concepts used, be it "culture," "values," or "fundamental structure," far too much of the Japanese "reality" is directly explained from basic tendencies the Japanese (are supposed to) possess. The advocate of the breakaway from individual reductionism, Hamaguchi himself, becomes eventually "relatum" reductionist in his interpretation of Japanese "reality."

"Reality" consists, however, not only in Japan, but in many countries of a mosaic of systems. More than actual human behavior is being guided directly from the depths of "culture," it is restricted in many ways by "institutions" that are nothing more than external circumstances for the individual's behavior. Or again, within this structural framework, the individual often makes choices of concrete behavior guided by goal-oriented rational calculations.

"Culture" is certainly a valid element in explaining human behavior, but the starting point of the analysis of "reality" should not be "culture" but "institutions" and rational behavior within the framework of these "institutions." The greatest shortcoming of "theories of Japanese culture" in the analysis of "reality" is the implementation of explaining with "culture" as a starting point. If "culture" is used as a concept, then eventually all of Japan's "reality" becomes explainable by "culture" only and as a result the heterogeneity of Japan will stand out all the more prominently. With what kind of procedures do we have to limit the extent of applicability of the superb concepts of the theory of Japanese culture such as the vertical society, relationalism, or the structure of indulgence? This is surely a problem that warrants further enquiry.

"Local theory" concerning Japan need not be limited to the theory of Japanese culture. In opposition to the fact that a theory of culture fixes itself on the basic characteristics of behavior, such as values, personal relationships, etc., "theories" that lay much more emphasis on the analysis of an institutional level are fairly thinkable. Institutions are more changeable than "culture" and for this reason "Institutions are valuable variables"<sup>11</sup> for diverse social phenomena. Is it not so that we can discover in societies consisting of a mosaic of institutions similarities at the institutional level or in the goal-oriented rational behavior within these institutions, even if there are differences at the level of cultural values? As previously stated, we have to search for a clue for the theory of Japanese culture, which came into existence as a negation of the "negative peculiarities" of the theory of absences, to mature as a general social and cultural science that has gone beyond the analysis of a "local subject."

Finally, in order to surmount the limitations of the theory of Japanese culture and to escape from the "dilemma of heterogeneity" in which present-day



Japan is placed, I want to propose here a theory of reverse absences, as an effort to reverse the theory of absences, which was the conventional intellectual tradition of Japan and to detect phenomena similar to those in Japan in societies outside Japan. The theory of absences is described above. In opposition to the theory of absences, which states that the elements that "are found in foreign countries are not found in Japan," the theory of reverse absences is a method of observing foreign countries by stating that elements which "are found in Japan are also to be found in foreign countries." In opposition to the conception that "(Japan is special because) elements existing in foreign countries are not found in Japan," the theory of Japanese culture has stressed that "Japan has (unique) Japanese principles." The theory of reverse absences that I want to propose is a method of placing certain limitations on the "theory of uniqueness" that these two theories have in common.<sup>12</sup>

The mistake often made by the critics of the theory of Japanese culture in their statement that the world consists of mankind, which is basically homogeneous, is their excess emphasis on this homogeneity. The real problem is the creation of a framework for the analysis that can provide insight into both the heterogeneous and homogeneous elements of the culture and social structures of each country. Furthermore, researchers who have Japan as their main research object (they should, of course, not be limited to Japanese alone), ought to put the "reality" of Japan at the "core" of their "theories", and at the same time ought to search for possibilities for social and cultural sciences, which are conceived from Japan and which do not limit the extent of their applicability to Japan alone.

The theory of reverse absences is not a "theory" to interpret foreign countries by force, but a "theory" to interpret Japan. It is a "heuristic" method of observing foreign countries and a conceptual framework for the "rediscovery" of Japan. It is a method of identifying the characteristics of behavior and systems restricted by goal-oriented rational behavior or institutional frameworks, from behavior that originates in cultural values. The theory of reverse absences has following characteristics:

- (1) Japanese assume that all Japanese behavior and institution are goal oriented rational.
- (2) Japanese assume that elements existing in Japan must possess universality and are to be found in other countries, too.
- (3) Departing from the above standpoint, we try to analyze foreign countries with a theoretical framework that has as its objective the understanding of Japanese society
- (4) Further, if phenomena similar to those in Japan are not found in a foreign country, we try to think of "special circumstances" in that foreign country which account for the "absence" of these Japanese phenomena.

(5) Finally, we reexamine the proposition of goal-oriented rationality and universality of the Japanese phenomena. That is to say, should we to examine cultural values (cultural theoretical interpretation) or shall we examine the hypothesis of irrational behavior or institutions?

### Notes

1. Johnson (1989).
2. Nakane (1967).
3. Ibid
4. Befu (1987).
5. Aoki (1990)
6. Hamaguchi (1988).
7. Hamaguchi (1990).
8. Hamaguchi (1988).
9. Maeda (1989). See my review of this book (1991a).
10. Nakane (1967).
11. Johnson (1989).
12. I have given my viewpoint in *Kyoiku Shakaigaku Kenkyu* (1991b).

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